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The Bottle Imp

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Best Scottish Books of 2013

Was 2013 a good year for Scottish publishing? And – more importantly – have you missed anything? There's still time to catch up! ASLS has asked twenty-two authors, academics, and members of the literary sector to tell us about their favourite Scottish book from this past year. The book could be in English, Scots, or Gaelic, it could be published for the first time in 2013 or re-issued this year, and could be a work of fiction, poetry, or academic research. And what a wonderful list it is. We've got some well-kent faces here and exciting new ones, and some thoughts here and there on the state of Scottish publishing in general. There is something for everyone, so get comfy, and have a browse through the Best Scottish Books from 2013. The list is organised by title. If your favourite isn't here, let us know about it!

What was your favourite book of 2013?

Another Country by John Herdman

Thirsty Books, 2013

chosen by James Robertson, a poet, writer of fiction, editor, and co-founder of the Scots language imprint Itchy Co. His latest novel is The Professor of Truth (2013).

This short but immensely engaging book reprints, in expanded form, two essays first published as pamphlets some years ago. John Herdman, esteemed writer of fiction, was a young man in Edinburgh in the 1960s, whose largely conventional father kept company with the wilder elements of Scottish literary society – the Rose Street poets who congregated around Hugh MacDiarmid in the Abbotsford, Milne's Bar and other smoky howffs. This was Herdman's entry into that heady atmosphere, and his memoir of political and poetic fallings-out and unlikely alliances is witty, acute in its

observations and still relevant to the culture debates of our times.

As Far As I Can See by Eunice Buchanan

Kettillonia, 2013

chosen by Jim Tough, Executive Director of the Saltire Society

It's a privilege seeing new work arrive for our Saltire Literary awards and hear the panel discuss their merits. And I can see why they awarded Eunice's collection as our First Book of the Year for 2013. It's my choice too! It is a truly Scottish collection, in language, landscape and seascape. It's an intimate and personal appreciation of our fauna and their place in the world. But it is also universal in the themes of family and the passing of time. There's humour – 'Oh, come awa, Sun! Spill the beams.' – and defiance – 'I will look the Almichty in the face – an I will hae my say.' So much craft, intelligence and insight expressed in such an accessible way, this collection has become an inspiring companion.

Best Scottish Poems 2012 edited by Zoë Strachan and Louise Welsh

Scottish Poetry Library, 2013

chosen by Robyn Marsack, Director of the Scottish Poetry Library

Anthologies are a way of sneaking in more than one author ... so I'll plump for the SPL's own annual online anthology, Best Scottish Poems 2012, edited by Zoë Strachan and Louise Welsh. It's a great way to catch up on a year's worth of Scottish poetry, and then to go off exploring the work that intrigued you most, from writers both well-known and new. And for the first time, we've got recordings by all but one of the poets, so you can hear the poems as the authors heard them in their own heads.

Burnt Island by Alice Thompson

Salt Publishing, 2013

chosen by Alistair Braidwood, who runs the website Scots Whay Hae! and is Senior Editor at Cargo Publishing.

There were a few memorable novels this year, but Alice Thompson's *Burnt Island* is the one which has stayed with me. Unashamedly literary and clever, without being pretentious, it is ostensibly a mystery which is also a commentary on writing, self-obsession and the complexity of the artistic process. A book which can be read on many levels, and one which rewards repeated readings, *Burnt Island* is a satire in the classical sense, one which exposes

vanity, vice and ambition and holds them up not only as a commentary on present day writing, but the culture in which people write.

Burnt Island by Alice Thompson

Salt Publishing, 2013

chosen by **Regi Claire**, author and Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund at Queen Margaret University. Her latest book is *The Waiting* (2012).

Alice Thompson's *Burnt Island* is that rare thing: a novel about writers and writing that tries to go to the heart of the matter. No campus intrigues here, nor any writing-group rivalries. Instead, a gripping psychological study of the passions, the pain and the perils of being creative. Max Long's story is, in truth, a story about the power of the imagination and the nature of reality – as if imagination itself were going walkabout in a hall of mirrors. A game of unravellings or, in Max's own words, 'stories within stories of replicas and shadows'. Shape-shifting, deadly serious yet playful and tongue-in-cheek too, with flashes of humour that made me laugh out loud, *Burnt Island* is a lyrical, spine-tingling read, hallucinatory and hallucinogenic. Totally addictive.

Call of the Undertow by Linda Cracknell

Freight Books, 2013

chosen by **Angie Crawford**, Scottish Buying Manager at Waterstones

This book was a very unexpected treasure! I hadn't read anything by Linda Cracknell until now so didn't have any expectations. For me it was not so much the story but the writing. At the same time beautiful and haunting, it conveys a remarkably strong sense of place and tradition, that rugged remote landscape (and coastline) of the North of Scotland. It's a few months since I've read it, yet I still find myself musing the echoing, rich fabric of those legends.

Definite Articles: Selected Prose 1973–2012 by Tom Leonard

Word Power Books, 2013

chosen by **Alan Bissett**, author, dramatist, and actor. His latest novel is *Pack Men* (2012).

My favourite Scottish book of 2013 was Tom Leonard's *Definite Articles: Selected Prose 1973–2012*, a collection of essays on language, power, poetry, psychiatry and family, among other subjects. Those who dismiss Leonard's writing as some volcanic fount of anger miss the breadth and depth of his range. Of course he can – and should – be angry, but the amount of wit, empathy and intellect on

display here easily offsets this. Leonard can skip from a discussion of Chekhov or John Clare to a series of black jokes about the West's military adventures in the Middle East, in a register refreshingly un-stuffy and jargon-free. In this collection Leonard proves himself to be not only one of our finest poets, but a true working-class intellectual, championing the oppressed against the various, stultifying structures of power which govern us.

The Great Tapestry of Scotland by Alistair Moffat

Birlinn, 2013

chosen by **Vikki Reilly**, Sales and Marketing Liaison, Birlinn Ltd.

I am unashamedly biased (enthusiastic!) about this book, and everything to do with *The Great Tapestry of Scotland* project, having been a stitcher myself, and seeing the work that went into this beautiful celebration of the project. Every time I turn a page, I am reminded of the vibrant colours, the fantastic storytelling, the amazing skill and the tireless dedication of each stitcher. We are all in this book, and I think that's what I love most about it.

Hill of Doors by Robin Robertson

Picador, 2013

chosen by **Kevin MacNeil**, novelist, poet, playwright, editor and an Honorary Writer-in-Residence at Kingston University. His latest book is *These Islands We Sing: An Anthology of Scottish Islands Poetry* (2011).

It's fair to say that 2013 was a compelling, but not a vintage, year in the world of Scottish literature. Two of the finest books of the year overall were brought to us courtesy of a Scottish publisher – Canongate Books – but were not written by Scots (*Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Ron Rash and *Taipei* by Tao Lin). The ASLS's own publication *New Writing Scotland 31: Black Middens* proved itself a reliable barometer of the times, showcasing as it did an overabundance of writing, with the editors asking contributors to 'raise your game, challenge and surprise us.' The best book of 2013 by a Scottish writer is Robin Robertson's *Hill of Doors*. There are many things I love about Robertson's work – how easy-seeming but deeply crafted it is, how uncompromising but nuanced, how elemental but visionary. I also admire his poetry's egalitarian appeal – I've seen hardened London critics and sweet Ullapool *cailleachs* alike rave about his work – a very good thing for Scottish literature, if all too rare.

Intrusion by Ken MacLeod

Orbit, 2013 (pbk)

chosen by **Duncan Jones**, Director of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies and co-editor of *The Bottle Imp Scottish Studies ezine*

Ken MacLeod's *Intrusion* postulates a subtle dystopia: a still-comfortable UK, as democratic as it's always been, with well-trained, diligent police; if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear – except being suspected of having something to hide. An unsettlingly plausible near-future, just a logical next step away, where they'll burn your books because of the second-hand cigarette smoke they contain. MacLeod's own pitch for *Intrusion* was "a genomic Aga Saga", but there's a whiff of Highland magic in the mix: citizens and State alike might find their reality to be less secure than they thought ...

Laidlaw by William MacIlvanney

Canongate, 2013

chosen by **Lin Anderson**, author, screen-writer, and crime-writing creator of forensic scientist *Rhona MacLeod*, who most recently appears in *Picture Her Dead (2011)*.

First published in 1977, republished in 2013, William MacIlvanney's seminal work featuring Jack Laidlaw, a man who just happens to be a policeman, has again taken the crime genre and the literary world by storm. A forerunner and inspiration for Scotland's home grown crime writing stars, it questions our humanity at its deepest level and challenges us to ask where the true monster lies. Arguably the font from which Tartan Noir flowed, its power lies in the voice it gives to the ordinary citizens of Glasgow, their hopes, dreams, fears, prejudices, cruelties and their kindness. A great book, yet to be surpassed.

Laidlaw by William MacIlvanney

Canongate, 2013

chosen by **Francis Bickmore**, Publishing Director at *Canongate Books*

Laidlaw is the missing link. The alchemical fusion of Chandler's American noir, the existentialism of Camus and the mean streets of 1970s Glasgow. It is the mental leap that forged the parameters for what is now one of our biggest exports, Scottish crime fiction. Rankin, McDermaid, Mina, Brookmyre et al all agree: they couldn't have done it without William MacIlvanney. Long out of print, in 2013 the *Laidlaw* trilogy came back, and is as compulsive and brilliant as they ever were. Essential reading.

A Tribute to Iain M. Banks

chosen by **Caroline McCracken-Flesher**, Professor of English, University of Wyoming. Her most recent book is *The Doctor Dissected: A Cultural Autopsy of the Burke and Hare Murders (2011)*.

Taking some poetic license, I'm nominating not a book but an author. For 2013, my 'best of' is Iain M. Banks. And note the 'M'. Banks's science fiction is ubiquitous in book stores across the world. This year, I had the great pleasure of dwelling in that universe, and the book I most want to recommend stands for many worlds, realms of philosophy, and a huge international influence. *The Algebraist* (2004) with its layered narratives digs deep into issues of identity, place and time to suggest that we can get almost anywhere from right here. A great book by which to remember an author without compare.

Màiri Dhall agus Sgeulachd eile by Duncan Gillies

Clàr, 2013

chosen by **Rosemary Ward**, Director of *Comhairle nan Leabhraichean / The Gaelic Books Council*

2013 was a bumper year for Gaelic publications! *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach*, the first Gaelic science fiction novel, written by Tim Armstrong and published by Clàr, won the Saltire Society First Book of the Year Award. *Fonn*, the beautiful publication by Acair that celebrates the cultural heritage of Gaelic Scotland through the memories of the famous singing family the Campbells of Greepe, won the Arts and Culture category in the *Daily Record* 2013 Gaelic Awards. We were treated to a wealth of new fiction, non-fiction, poetry and graphic novels in 2013 but my personal favourite was another Clàr publication, *Màiri Dhall agus Sgeulachd eile*, a wonderful collection of short stories written by Duncan Gillies. This book provides a perfectly balanced mixture of poignant and humorous stories, crafted by Duncan in his beautifully rich, idiomatic, native Ness Gaelic. This is a book that I return to time and again and still keep finding more pearls!

The Missing Shade of Blue by Jennie Erdal

Abacus, 2013

chosen by **Cynthia Rogerson**, author, Program Director at Moniak Mhor writers' centre, and manuscript assessor for The Literary Consultancy and Hi Arts
Favourite read of the year has to be *The Missing Shade of Blue* by Jennie Erdal. It has an utterly

convincing French narrator, an articulate and prim academic who from the first page injects a gentle tension with his seductively clever observations of a less than happy marriage. The tone is subtle, sophisticated yet soothingly accessible. So – philosophy, romance, sex, contemporary Edinburgh – really, what more could anyone ask for? Other great reads this year have been *The Girl on the Ferry* by Angus Peter Campbell and *Call of the Undertow* by Linda Cracknell. These are great additions to world literature, not just Scottish.

The New Testament in Scots translated by W. L. Lorimer

Canongate Books, 2013
chosen by **Michael Hance**, Director of the Scots Language Centre

The way we understand the world, whether we are Christians or not, is informed by the New Testament. The Gospels are at the heart of European culture and it is through the New Testament that we conceptualise the world. *The New Testament in Scots*, published this year in hardback, renders those complex ideas in Scots. W. L. Lorimer was an extraordinarily gifted linguist. In his translation from Hebrew and Greek he demonstrates the capacity of Scots to express the ideas and stories which provide the philosophical underpinnings of western culture.

Night Boat by Alan Spence

Canongate Books, 2013
chosen by **Mark Buckland**, Managing Director of Cargo Publishing, Director of Margins Book & Music Festival, and Unearth Technologies

If I were biased, I'd go for one of our own – a bold debut voice in Nicola White or insightful political commentary of Iain Macwhirter. But I won't be biased. One moment, you're under a holy mountain, the next you're drunk in a Dundee bar. Odd life, publishing is. The mountain in question was Mount Fuji in Japan, the book I was reading was *Night Boat* by Alan Spence and in the bar in Dundee, I was gabbing with Stuart Kelly, critic and judge of the Booker Prize in 2013. He made a point, that following my beer-haze I have to paraphrase and paraphrase very badly at that, that desire is a key component of novels, and *Night Boat* is in many ways a true Buddhist novel – it has no desire. How do you push a narrative forward then? In the case of Spence's story of the monk Hakuin, it's through beautiful, lilting prose that seems to propel you through an entire life with no more force than a leaf

falling from a tree. (My analogies get kinda Zen after a few drinks ...) Is Spence successful in an attempt to write a truly Buddhist novel? I'm not sure; but it's one of the most ambitious and oddly spiritual reads I've ever come across – on those grounds alone, it's my pick of the year.

Night Boat by Alan Spence

Canongate Books, 2013
chosen by **Gwen Enstam**, International Project Developer for ASLS and co-editor of The Bottle Imp *Scottish Studies* ezine

2013 has been a great year for Scottish fiction. *Close Your Eyes* by Ewan Morrison, *The Girl on the Stairs* by Louise Welsh, *The Missing Shade of Blue* by Jennie Erdal, *Night Boat* by Alan Spence and *The Professor of Truth* by James Robertson are all spectacular novels and make the choice of my favourite book a really tough one! But since it has to be one, that one has to be *Night Boat*. Based on the real life of eighteenth-century Zen monk, and later abbot, Ekaku Hakuin, *Night Boat* is a beautifully written tale of a man's travels through the wild countryside of Japan and through the challenges of his own mind. You're reading a story about a young adventurer, a pilgrim, and a teacher all in one. And the concept of telling stories to teach – a notable reference in the title of the novel itself – is as ever-present as the comforting touchstone Mount Fuji. There is poetry within the prose, and inspiration within every obstacle. Ekaku Hakuin is credited with reviving Zen Buddhism from a state of lethargy and decline; a famous poet, his most well-known *koan* – a Zen paradox used in teaching – is 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' And like a *koan*, *Night Boat* is a masterpiece, challenging us to step outside of our usual perception of the way the world works. In this Spence is as excellent a teacher as Hakuin.

The Panopticon by Jenni Fagan

Windmill Books, 2013
chosen by **Ali Bowden**, Director of the Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature Trust
Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* is a book of intense, pure and brilliant energy and insight. Just as *Trainspotting* taught many of us about a hidden aspect of our city, Edinburgh's drug culture, *The Panopticon* stops you in your tracks and shows you just how brutal and crushing life can be for young folk caught up in our social care system. Anais Hendricks is lost in that system but in her Jenni Fagan has crafted

a character that speaks to us so directly, so honestly, it's astonishing and in the end gives us all hope.

Praise of Ben Dorain by Duncan Ban MacIntyre edited with a new English version by Alan Riach

Kettillonia, 2013

chosen by **Ian Brown**, playwright, poet, and Visiting Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is the President of ASLS. His latests publication is *Scottish Theatre: Diversity, Language, Continuity (2013)*.

One tends – or at least I tend – to think books of the year must be beefy tomes. My choice is almost, though not quite, a pamphlet. Alan Riach's version of Duncan Ban MacIntyre's *Praise of Ben Dorain* is slim at forty-four pages, not beefy, but certainly meaty, the relevant meat, of course, being lean venison. Riach achieves in English a marvellous, spare, sometimes stunning, complexity of rhyme, rhythm and imagery that does not seek some straightforward line for line parallel with the original. (How could he? He does not speak Gaelic.) He works from other translations, with the advice of Gaelic-speaking artists, to shape a lively anglophone's version which reflects the original's poetic structures and vitality. He shows the grace and power of a fine poet inspired by a great predecessor. I re-read it with ever more pleasure and admiration for both the original and his response.

The Professor of Truth by James Robertson

Hamish Hamilton, 2013

chosen by **Carla Sassi**, Associate Professor of Languages and Literature at the University of Verona. Her latest publication is *Within and Without Empire: Scotland across the (Post) colonial Borderline (2013)*.

This is a fascinating novel and quite different from Robertson's previous work. Set in the present, it charts the effort of a single man to retrieve the truth about a terrorist attack on a flight where his wife and daughter were killed twenty years earlier. Filtered through his traumatised consciousness, both the language and structure of the novel, that evokes, without ever mentioning, the Lockerbie case, appear grippingly rarefied and poetic. This is, however, an historical narrative in its own right – retrieving truth (and thus justice) is in fact the only way to turn personal trauma into historical memory.

Robert Bruce by G. W. S. Barrow

Edinburgh University Press, 2013

chosen by **John Watson**, Commissioning Editor for Law & Scottish Studies Edinburgh University Press

Robert Bruce is simply the finest Scottish History book written in the 20th century. Nothing comes close in terms of the breadth of understanding that Barrow brings to his subject – he unrolls a complex mental map of Scotland during the Wars of Independence and he colours this with the 'game of thrones' intrigue wrought by the protagonists of the time. Barrow's knowledge of the land echoes that of Bruce and is presented with a cinematic sweep – you can almost feel the camera pan down over the bloodied heather, rivers and fields of Scotland in this violent era of change – it's simply great history!

Scots: Studies in its Literature and Language eds. John M. Kirk and Iseabail Macleod

Rodopi (SCROLL series), 2013

chosen by **Marina Dossena**, Professor of English Language at the University of Bergamo

It is always a pleasure to be invited to list favourite books, but if the request is to identify 'the Best Scottish Book of the Year' the difficulty of choices begins to emerge in all its glory ... And this is particularly true when several very good books have appeared in a relatively short time span. For instance, my interests have recently led me to Caroline McCracken-Flesher (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*: I would certainly recommend this book for the constant appeal of RLS's works and the consequent need for state-of-the-art studies capable of making such works accessible to readers of all ages and levels of expertise. Also Carla Sassi and Theo van Heijnsbergen (eds), *Within and Without Empire: Scotland Across the (Post)colonial Borderline* is well worth perusing for its innovative approach to Scotland's place in the global literary world. Finally, I would recommend John M. Kirk and Iseabail Macleod (eds), *Scots: Studies in its Literature and Language*, a Festschrift for J. Derrick McClure, one of the leading figures in studies of Scotland's linguistic and literary complexity, not least in relation to translation studies. It is indeed very difficult to choose just one ... If I really had to, however, I think I would opt for the third one: borrowing the Bard's famous line, according to which 'Freedom and whisky gang thegither', we might say that 'Language

and literature gang thegither' – something true all over the world, but which in Scotland has always been extremely relevant, and is well worth remembering at all times.

***The Secret Knowledge* by Andrew Crumey**

Daedalus Books, 2013

chosen by **Ewan Morrison**, the author of *Close Your Eyes* (2013). He was voted *Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Writer of the Year 2012/2013*. The adaptation of his novel, *Swung*, was filmed in winter 2013 in Scotland. He is currently working on his seventh book, *Day One*.

2013 has been a quite terrible year for Scottish literature on many levels. With the loss of our most imaginative author and the demise of four indigenous publishing houses as the digital monopolies wreak their havoc, there is a desperate need among authors to try something new as the publishing world continues its disastrous shrinkage and well-known writers get dropped by publishers and end up on state subsidy. What to do? Start again? Create a pseudonym? Should the great and the good continue to plough their own solitary furrows in a world of diminishing readerships and shrinking returns? Into the void steps Andrew Crumey with his seventh novel *The Secret Knowledge*. *The Secret Knowledge* is almost an epic on the scale of *Cloud Atlas* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, it somehow manages to interweave Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, civil unrest and the discovery of a lost symphony. A singular work of genius? Not quite or maybe. This shake-down of fiction and its possibilities is exactly what the Scottish novel should be doing if it wants to survive this time of change.



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